

Uy'skwuluwun: On being Indigenous

Introduction

As I prepare to write my comprehensive exams and then begin my research, I find myself thinking about doing research in my own community. More specifically, I find myself wondering what I need to do to prepare myself to do all the work that lies ahead with integrity. Cora Weber-Pillwax (2001) claims, "Any research that I do must not destroy or in any way negatively implicate or compromise my own personal integrity as a person, as a human-being." But equally as important is maintaining the integrity of the Slheni Siem that I will be working with.

Slheni Siem of the Hwulmuhw Mustimuhw is my research project. The closest translated title for this is "Respected Women of the People." I want to look at leadership roles that Slheni have played in our communities. What are their stories? What has changed leadership roles in our communities? What are the important Slheni teachings?

Uy'skwuluwun is the Hul'qumi'num word, which roughly translates to be of a good mind and a good spirit, however in the Hul'qumi'num sense, the mind and spirit are not actually separate. But, definitely uy'skwuluwun is about integrity and being in a good way. The only way that I can enter my community is 'in a good way.' It is

interesting that doing research in my own community seems more of a concern for me than any other research I have undertaken. I wonder, why?

Lately, I have been reading about Indigenous scholarship and I have been wondering, what does it mean to lay claim to being an Indigenous scholar? What is different than simply claiming to be a scholar? Lets begin by looking at what it means to be Indigenous? Recently, publications that focus on Indigenous identity have increased. However, there is not consensus on what an Indigenous identity is. The spectrum ranges from simple self-identification to the ability to speak your language. Some claim that you must physically live on your traditional lands to truly be Indigenous. Others have asked for proof of membership. And some claim that you must be full-blooded to even write or speak about Indigenous issues.

When I was a child indigenous identity was not as complex as it is today, not many of us claimed to be Indigenous if we were not. But today, with the specialized program, equity hiring's, and even the romanticized Indigenous princess/warrior, more and more people are claiming to be Indigenous. To really delve into this issue of identity, is in and of itself a paper. And, for what I am looking at, it is not necessary to do a thorough search into this, but to recognize that the notion of an Indigenous identity is very complicated.

The other term is scholar. We all know that scholarship must have something to do with research, publishing, teaching, academia and intellect. So what is so complicated when the two terms are linked? **INDIGENOUS SCHOLAR**. Everything changes. First, I am claiming that somehow I am different from, say a white scholar. But how am I different, and more importantly, how would you see this difference in my work? What I have come to realize is that what is different is that my scholarship must, and is, rooted in who and what I am as a hwulmuhw or Hul'qumi'num person.

Last year I spent some time looking at ethics in Indigenous research. In this work I identified four values: respect, relationships, responsibility and reciprocity, that I thought were integral to researching in or about Indigenous issues. These are fairly universal values in Indigenous country and have been identified in works such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

When thinking about values and Indigenous research, I am also concerned with writing and practice. What has been emerging is that notion that these values are life values - they are about how we live our life. I remember reading an article by bell hooks a couple years ago and she stated that anti-racism is actually about anti-racist living. What I took from this is that anti-racism is a way of life and not about a way to practice. We are either living anti-racism, or we are not. If we are

picking and choosing when we want to be anti-racist, then we are racist. This totally makes sense to me. I either embrace *uy'skwuluwun* or I do not. This may seem like a hard line to draw, but I believe it to be true.

We have many teachings that remind us that we are whole human beings and that our lives are not separated and categorized. We are always all things. I am spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual. I am a mother, partner, daughter, sister, granddaughter, aunt, niece, friend, student, colleague, and teacher (to name a few). When I go into the community, I am all of these things. In the classroom I am all of these things. When I do my research, I am all of these things, and right now I am all of these things. So how is it that somehow when we engage with research or writing that we wonder if the work we are doing is ethical? All that we do reflects who we are. I think if we need to ask if something is ethical or done in a good way, it probably isn't.

Before I begin, I would be remiss not to mention a few issues that I have not included, but have been identified as critical to Indigenous writing. One of the most profound issues was about representation. How is it that I can represent these Hul'qumi'num women, many of whom will be Elders? I know that I long to be like my Grandmother, but I will never represent her. I am definitely guided by her teachings and wisdom, but this is as close as I can get to representing her -

embracing her values and beliefs. Perhaps representation has to do with shared values and beliefs.

As well as representation, I know that all Indigenous writing is about place and politics, but for the purpose of this paper, I will not delve into these issues. What I will say is that for sure there is something about place and the particular places of our Ancestors that keeps us connected to our territory. When I describe my 'place' I must begin by stating that I am Lyackson. However, I am so because I was married prior to 1985 and at that time the *Indian Act* stipulated that I transfer to my partner's band. My Grandmother was Lavina Wyse of Snux'ney'mewx. My Grandfather was Charles Prest of Skwah in the Fraser Valley.

Politics is another inevitable aspect for Indigenous writers. Bird (1998) states that as a writer, everything he does is "motivated by a political agenda" and that "being Indian in the United States is inherently political" (p. 28). I would add that being Indian in Canada is inherently political as well. This is something that over the years I am beginning to more clearly understand.

I mentioned above that I have identified four values that I thought must be present in Indigenous scholarship, and I now want to focus a bit on them. I will begin by stating that these four values, like all things, are interrelated and not easily separated. But for the purpose of writing this paper, I will discuss them

separately. I will use two books written by Non-Indigenous authors to look for the presence or absence of the values. Both of these books are about Indigenous people or stories. The first is Calvin Luther Martin's (1999) book *The Way of the Human Being* and the second book is Steve Wall's (2001) book *To Become a Human Being: The message of Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah*.

Respect

When I think of respect, I think of it from a few different angles. First, there is the respect that we show the people we are working with in our daily and personal interactions. Then, there is the respect that we pay to people in our writing. Both our personal interactions and our writing must be respectful. However, as writers, we must honour and respect the voices that make up the expertise of our work. If the wisdom we are sharing is not ours, acknowledge and respect where it comes from.

In his introduction, Martin (1999) states that,

I began my academic career by writing a book about Indians and animals (beavers, mostly) and the fur trade. At the time I knew no Indians and had never laid eyes on a living beaver - I had learned it all from libraries (p.x).

From here, he goes on to explain that this book *The Way of the Human Being* is different from all of his other research - it has spirit - *yua*. It was written in Alaska and based on Yup'ik stories of interconnections between humans, animals

and the universe. As I read this book I felt what he was sharing was respectful, well written and I did not pick up on anything that was overtly offensive or disrespectful. However, not being a Yup'ik person, I am not sure that I would pick up on subtleties or mistruths. His writing reminded me of quote that I recently read:

Much of what has been written is historically accurate and not harmful or offensive; it is sensitively, and in some cases beautifully done. What is missing is the passion from within and the authority to ask new and different questions based on histories and experiences as indigenous people (Swisher, 1998, p.193).

When I was done, I wondered if these stories, as beautiful as they were, would support the Yup'ik's struggles. I felt that for Martin, this book reflected what he learned about becoming a better human being himself. Briefly in the preface, Martin (1999), while paying tribute to those who supported his work lists five "dear Yup'ik friends whose lives inform this book. I am indebted to them" (p. xi-xii). But, their words became his stories.

Steve Wall (2001) pays tribute to the life of the late Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah. Shenandoah and Wall met in 1984; in 1992 they talked about Wall writing a book on Leon's "way of life and philosophy for living. About becoming 'a human being,' as he put it" (p. ix). After his passing in 1996, Wall wrote the book. Other than the forward and introduction, the rest of the words written are the

voice of the Chief. These words are not interpreted or edited; they are written as they were shared. When I was done, I felt that I had a glimpse into the life of this honoured Chief and had been offered very important teachings. The respect that Steve Wall (2001) has for his friend is evident in the following quote:

When I find myself feeling a little sad, he comes to mind. I think of how much he loved living, how thankful he was to be on this earth, and how much he enjoyed everything around him. Then I breathe deeply and thank him. My sadness lifts and I can almost hear him laugh his quiet laugh. That's when I whisper "Thank you" to him and the Creator for the honor of knowing him as a true friend and as Tadodaho. The world is a better place because of him (p.xii).

Wall's book respects and honours his late friend Chief Shenandoah.

However, Martin's book seems to be at arm's length from Yup'ik. He acknowledges that it is his Yup'ik friends' lives that inform his book, but it feels more their words make up his story rather than their lives being reflected in his book. He also shares Navajo, Haida, Australian Aborigine, and Montagnais-Naskapi stories. I wondered where he got these stories. Should they not also be respected and honoured?

Relationships

There are many ways to look at relationships. For sure there are our personal and familial relationships. However, Indigenous research must be inclusive of the individuals or the community within which we will be working. In research

that my colleague *Jacquie Green*, we interviewed 16 social workers from Indigenous Social Work Agencies and the workers said that the most important aspect of their work was building relationships with the families. In order to do this, they claimed, you must build relationships like they will be lifelong. When we enter a relationship knowing that it is a lifelong relationship, we pay particular attention to the more intimate details of relationship building. Building and maintaining lifelong relationships with the communities we enter must be pivotal to our work.

Wall pays particular attention to acknowledging the relationships he has with his storyteller. Wall and his wife knew Leon for twelve years and their relationships went beyond research, they became friends. Steve Wall (1999) discusses at length what this Elder meant to him. "Today there are no visible signs of Leon Shenandoah's having been on this earth, but he left more than footprints. He left a place in my heart, just as he did in the hearts of everyone who ever met him or knew him" (p. xii).

Martin definitely acknowledges the relationship that he built with the Yup'ik, but I do not know if these are ongoing relationships. His book is dedicated to his children. And, he seems to pay more attention to crediting and acknowledging his family, friends and editors than he does the storytellers. Throughout the book I

searched for more information about the Yup'ik storytellers, sadly, I did not find what I was looking for.

Responsibility

All Indigenous research must be accountable to the community and individuals that we are researching for/with/in. Responsibility must include allowing participants to edit and approve the text prior to publication or distribution. It must be our responsibility to ensure that what we put out there are publications that truly represents those we have worked with. It is so easy to take someone's story and make it our own. It is as simple as changing a word that can change someone's voice - which in turn changes the story.

As well, we are responsible to the Elders and Ancestors. They have given us gifts - the ability to speak, write, and research, they have passed down teachings, wisdom, etc. - we must honour their work and share what we do in the best possible way.

It was unclear whether or not the storytellers in Martin's work were given the opportunity to approve of his work prior to publication. By the time the book was finished he had left that community. The book seemed to reflect Martin's story of becoming a human being more than it was of the Yup'ik people.

Wall's book is written because he had made a commitment to Shenandoah. They planned on writing it together, but in the mean time the Elder went on to the Spirit World. Not only is Wall's work about responsibility, throughout the writing, you can hear the Chief's sense of responsibility. As a Tadodaho, he became the spiritual leader of the Six Nations. This meant that he had the responsibility to serve all people. Wall's responsibility is somewhat limited to Leon; however Shenandoah's words ooze with responsibility and teachings.

Reciprocity

I have always been taught that of what I take, I must return. For research this is central. We must ask ourselves, "What are we giving back to the community or the individuals that we are working with?" It is our responsibility to ensure that our work is purposeful by giving back to the community and not just meeting our own research needs and agendas.

In this area, both books have much to give back to the Indigenous communities. They are about teachings, they all discuss the interconnectedness between humans, animals and the universe and the interconnectedness of the past, present and future. But Wall's writing is more reciprocal than Martin's.

Wall's book is reciprocal in that it shares the words of a late great Chief. As well, this book is reciprocal through the words of the Chief Shenandoah. I had to

remind myself that Wall was the author, not Shenandoah. Chief Shenandoah believed that we must always share all that we know, consequently a book about his life. He was a spiritual leader and when discussing his mission in life, Leon states that, "our mission is always for the good of people" (Wall, 1999, p.3). Wall's book and Shenandoah's words are replete with teachings and examples of reciprocity - the book in and of itself is about giving back - Wall giving back to his buddy and the people of the Six Nations and Shenandoah giving back to all human beings.

The stories that Martin shares are important and now they will be saved as written text. But I was troubled and left wondering if there were any other benefits for the Yup'ik. How was the community that he lived in and wrote about empowered by his words? These are huge questions that must be addressed.

We must ensure that crucial questions such as these do not remain unanswered. Indigenous people have been saying for years that we are tired of being researched and never seeing any results. Years ago the old people used to say that researchers would come into our communities and bring promises of change, sometimes change to our social or economic conditions with the promise of funds or resources, other times promises to help us with our political issues such as land claims, but few of the promises ever materialized. Mihesuah speaks of scholar-

activists and believes that all that we do must be purposeful and involve some kind of action.

Conclusions

Using uy'skwuluwun as the measurement, how well did these authors score? Wall scored very well. His writing honoured the basic principles - respect, relationships, responsibility and reciprocity. Wall's work felt rooted in uy'skwuluwun - of a good mind and spirit. Martin's on the other hand, left me with far too many questions. I felt that he benefited more from the Yup'ik people than they did from his work. I was not sure if he has any kind of an ongoing relationship with the storytellers. His book was not difficult to read, in fact I learned things, but Indigenous research must go beyond pleasantries - it must give something back to the community.

Indigenous scholars themselves need to write more about uy'skwuluwun and the basic principles of Indigenous research. We need to demand that authors are not publishing our stories and making them their own as did Martin. As we articulate more clearly what Indigenous research should be, academic institutions such as colleges and universities should be forced to follow strict principles and protocols. A fine example of such standards is *Protocols & Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context*. These Protocols were developed and

implemented by the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria and are soon to be implemented throughout the Faculty of Human and Social Development. It would be nice if these standards applied University-wide, but this is a start.

In general, Indigenous scholars need to write more about themselves and their ways of knowing and being. More and more, First Nations themselves are being looked at to do this scholarship. Deloria (2001) suggests that through writing and publishing, we can declare "intellectual sovereignty and self-determination" (p. 7). We can write from a place of freedom. Devon Abbott Mihesuah (2004) claims, "as scholars we have the ability to empower Indigenous peoples" (p.x). A review of these books demonstrates the need for Indigenous scholars to continue to critique the writing of others and ensure that it is credible (honours the principles of *uy'skwuluwun*); this is true for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars.

I want to end with a short story. Last week at Hul'qumi'num lessons, I asked my Aunt to translate four values: respect, relationships, responsibility and reciprocity into Hul'qumi'num. She immediately launched into lesson on *snuw'uy'ul*. *Snuw'uy'ul* is a word that has to do with culture, tradition, spirituality, teachings, and governance - it is about a particular way of life. She talked about the importance of understanding *snuw'uy'ul* and then I would understand what the

values mean. Anyways, I never did get my translations, but I did realize that to her, these values, when embraced, are about a particular way of life.

So how can I ensure that these four values are present in my work? This is not an easy task, and I know that regardless of how much I try to represent Hul'qumi'num or Lyackson Hwulmuhw in a good way that there are always people that will deny that I actually do this. All that I can do is feel deep in my own spirit that I have based my work on strong teachings.

Bird, Gloria. 1998. In Simon Ortiz (Ed.) Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing. Breaking the Silence: Writing as “Witness”. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. Pp.26-49.

Deloria, Vine and Daniel Wildcat (Eds.) 2001. Power and Place: Indian Education in America. Colorado: Fulcrum Resources.

Indigenous Governance: Protocols & Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context. http://web.uvic.ca/igov/programs/masters/igov_598/protocol.pdf

Martin, Calvin Luther. 1999. The Way of the Human Being. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Mihesuah, Devon A. (Ed.) 1998. Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Mihesuah, Devon A. (Ed.) 2004

Ortiz, Simon (Ed.) 1998. Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Swisher, Karen Gayton. 1998 In Devon A. Mihesuah (Ed.) Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians. Why Indian People Should be the Ones to Write About Indian Education. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Pp.190-200.

Wall, Steve 2001. To Become a Human Being: The Message of Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah. Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.

Weber-Pillwax, Cora (2001)